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ABSTRACT

A semester-long, introductory, freshman composition class (24 students) engaged in fieldwork, interviews, workshopping, a literature review, an ethnography, and a final paper allowing the student to critique their experiences with the ethnographic process. The first 2 weeks were spent familiarizing students with the ethnographic process. Through fieldwork (begun in the third week), students learned to become critical and sensitive participant observers of the subculture they were studying. Students interviewed two informants of their choice. In groups of three or four, students critiqued each others' written work. Students honed their critical skills and were able to place their own work in perspective by writing a literature review. About three-quarters of the way through the course, the students finished their ethnographies, which were reproduced and bound for the students to read. All the students read the collection and then wrote a final paper about the ethnographies they read. Perhaps the most important aspect of the ethnographic process is that students begin to see how their own cultural ideas and beliefs influence how they portrayed the subculture they portrayed. The instructor must work with as many different projects as there are students and be familiar with ethnographic techniques. The ethnographic approach is a valuable tool in the freshman composition classroom because it exemplifies many aspects of the writing process and makes the students integrate information from a variety of sources, showing them that writing is more than just words on paper. (RS)

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An Ethnographic Approach to Teaching Writing in a Freshman Composition Classroom

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In 1972, anthropologist, Dell Hymes, introduced the term, "Communicative Competence" to the field of sociolinguistics. As the term suggests, Communicative Competence refers to one's ability to communicate effectively. However, this notion entails more than just knowing proper vocabulary, syntax, discourse, and grammar. It means knowing what is appropriate to say in various contexts as well as a plethora of other conversational and discourse decisions facing a speaker. In the same way that an effective speaker needs Communicative Competence, so does a writer. As writing teachers, we know that it is not enough that students write papers that are only grammatically and structurally correct. Their papers must also make sense, engage a reader, communicate a purpose, and fulfill all kinds of rhetorical expectations. Thus, even writers need to be communicatively competent. Drawing from the field of anthropology, I found a method, the ethnographic approach, which was very useful in helping develop communicative competence in my freshman writing students.

Ethnographies are qualitative descriptions of other cultures and throughout the twentieth century they have served as the hallmark of cultural anthropology. Ethnographies are informative in another manner, however, they reveal as much about the ethnographer, because of the way the ethnography is written, as they do about the subject that the ethnographer is discussing. As one ethnographer, John Van Maanen, notes:

> The narrative and rhetorical conventions assumed by a writer also shape ethnography. Ways of personal expression, choice of metaphor, figurative allusions, semantics, decorative phrasing or plain speaking, textual organization, and so on all work to structure a cultural portrait in particular ways. (Van Maanen 1988:6)

This characteristic of ethnographies is interesting to any writer or composition teacher because it acknowledges the role of the ethnographer not only as a cultural broker but also as a writer. Therefore, one can argue that <u>how</u> the ethnography is written is at least as important as <u>what</u> is being written about. While these rhetorical considerations are necessarily significant in ethnographic writing, they are just as relevant in all writing. It is these issues which render the ethnography as a potentially valuable teaching tool in a freshman composition writing class.

This paper describes a freshman composition course which utilized an ethnographic approach to teaching the principles of writing. The course was team taught. Both instructors had experience teaching composition at the university level and one of the instructors had experience doing ethnographies. The course structure and the fundamental features of an ethnographic approach to writing will be outlined. Additionally, the challenges and demands facing an instructor who adopts an ethnographic approach to writing will also be discussed.

Because the ethnography is definitely a special sort of writing, one needs to carefully consider why they might want to use it in

a writing class. It is not the case that the ethnography is appropriate in all situations, as different people hold different definitions of writing. In terms of the ethnographic approach to writing, we wanted to impart to our students that writing had the following characteristics. Writing is a dynamic process not a product, it is communication, creativity, and critical thinking; or, as in the words of rhetorician, Tilly Warnock, "writing is critical action, performed by people for specific purposes, in particular places, using language" (Warnock 1989: 7). The ethnographic approach embodied this definition of writing because through the process of fieldwork, students learned that writing really is composed of events and interactions with people using the medium of language. In addition, we regarded writing as a kind of relationship, one involving the constant negotiation between the writer, reader and subject. While this relationship may seem intuitive to many seasoned writers, it is often not so obvious to many freshmen writers. The ethnographic approach proved to be very useful in clarifying this relationship. From the outset, the students realized that they, as the ethnographers, were the writers; their peers and teachers, the immediate readers; and their chosen culture, their topic. The students immediately became aware of their mediating position between their informants (of the culture they were studying) and their audience. Furthermore, the ethnographic process demonstrated that each of these roles has its own language. In other words, the language of informants is not necessarily the same language of the writer.

Finally, there are two assumptions that should be noted about this approach. One, the main goal of the class was to teach students to write or further improve their writing, not to train them as ethnographers per say. Two, from the onset we stressed collaboration and group support in the process of writing the ethnographies. This latter point is important because it reflects our fundamental belief that writing is essentially a social and public activity. Given these premises and definitions we were ready to introduce the ethnography.

The course was a semester-long, introductory, freshmen composition course composed of twenty-four native English speakers none of whom, initially, were familiar with the ethnographic technique. The key features of our syllabus were fieldwork, interviews, workshopping, a literature review, an ethnography, and a final paper allowing the students to critique their experiences with the ethnographic process.

When the semester began, the first two weeks were devoted to discussing and explaining our philosophy of writing and why we were going to write ethnographies. It was during this time that we also had them begin reading their course texts which further clarified the relationship between the ethnographic process and writing. This was perhaps the most crucial point of the course because the students were initially hesitant about this new approach, which is an understandable reaction. The key was to not turn them off to

the idea. The texts we used were: James Spradley's The Ethnographic Interview which discusses the ethnographic process and Tilly Warnock's Writing is Critical Action, a writing text. The third text was the collection of all the students' final ethnographies. Finally, we also made available several student ethnographies from the collection, Cultural Experience: Ethnography in a Complex Society, by James Spradley and David McCurdy. By the third week of class the students were engaged in field work. The students chose a variety of subcultures to study such as resident hall assistants, the women's basketball team and the gay student union. Others went off campus and studied other groups such as physical therapists, an alcoholics anonymous group and workers at McDonalds.

Fieldwork was the hallmark of this course and it was through fieldwork that students took an active role in their own learning. The objective was to not only have students gather information for their ethnographies but also learn to become critical and sensitive participant observers of the subculture they were studying. From a writing perspective, the fieldnotes illustrated the evolution of the ethnography. The students learned that the final product doesn't just materialize out of air; it is a construct of all their experiences in the field, library and classroom.

Interviewing was another highlight of the ethnographic process. The students conducted two interviews with informants of their

choice. In many respects this was one of the more valuable aspects of the ethnographic approach. When the students had to evaluate and interpret the speech conventions of another speech community, their chosen sub-culture, they were learning valuable lessons about discourse and language.

Workshopping was another component of the ethnographic process. This technique, familiar to many writing teachers, is an activity in which groups of three or four students take turns critiquing each others' written work. The goal of workshopping is to teach students to take responsibility for their own writing and to depend upon themselves and possibly a peer in the revision process. Within the context of our ethnographic approach, workshopping accomplished two objectives: it allowed students to discuss problems that they were having with fieldwork and it allowed us, the instructors, an opportunity to address writing issues in a contextualized format. The fieldnotes were an excellent source of ideas which could be later developed in the final ethnography.

Another aspect of the ethnographic writing process was the literature review. We felt the literature review was important for several reasons. One, we wanted to expose the students to various kinds of writing. Students used all kinds of secondary sources such as journal articles, books, magazines, government documents, etc. During workshopping we encouraged students to scrutinize and critique these outside references. From this exercise they not

only honed their critical skills but they also realized that even published writers "don't always get it right." Two, by realizing what others have said about their topic, the students were able to place their own work and perceptions of the culture, or subculture they were studying, in perspective. From the literature review the students realized that their ethnography reflected their own personal cultural and social orientation and that this was an issue they would have to address in their writing. Third, knowing how to incorporate outside references into one's own work is an essential requirement of academic writing.

About three-quarters of the way through the course, the students finished their ethnographies. They were given several opportunities through workshopping to revise and edit the drafts of their ethnographies. Once the ethnographies were finished we had them xeroxed and bound for everyone to read. The "publishing" of the students' ethnographies instilled a sense of accomplishment in each of the students and is also recognized as an effective technique by other composition teachers (Bartholmae and Petrosky, 1988 and Graves, 1983). Each student author not only gained a sense of recognition but also felt validated as a writer - a feeling every writer needs.

All the students read this collection and then wrote a final paper about the ethnographies they read and how they personally felt about the ethnographic process. The final paper was the last

assignment of the course because we wanted the students to realize that the ethnographic process is like the writing process in many ways - there is no "real" end point, only where the writer stops. In order to avoid the termination/product approach, the ethnographies were finished well before the end of the course, so there was ample time for the students to reflect on both the ethnographies and the process itself.

Thus far, I have enumerated the specific advantages of the ethnographic approach to teaching composition. There are, however, some general benefits which I would like to mention. First, the ethnographic approach to writing allows the writing process to be broken down into discrete steps so that writing can become more manageable. On the other hand, creating the ethnography is also an extended project, and students learn that writing is a process that occurs over time not in one sitting. Second, the ethnographic approach instills the content part of writing back into writing. Too often many freshmen see writing in a purely mechanical way. They see writing as no more than thesis statements, topic sentences, examples, and conclusions. By the time students think in terms of people, places, situations and contexts, many problems concerning the mechanics of writing usually resolve themselves. Third, the ethnographic approach allows the students an opportunity to learn by doing their own research and that the conclusions they form are worthy of notice. In effect, the ethnographic approach validates students as true researchers and writers. Fourth, the

ethnographic approach gives students control over their writing and makes them an authority on their own subjects. Finally, the students learn about themselves in a number of different roles: students, writers, participants in the subculture they are studying, etc. The students' reflections on their experiences are necessarily reflective. Through workshopping and class discussions the students begin to see how their own cultural ideas and beliefs influences how they portrayed (through writing) the subculture they studied. This may be the most important aspect of the ethnographic process because they realize that they are inextricably involved in their writing.

Up to this point, I have described the ethnographic process almost solely in terms of the students. It should be noted that the role of the instructor is also very important in this approach. Teaching an ethnographic writing course is challenging. The teacher must work with as many different projects as there are students in the class and s/he must respond to the individual problems and issues raised by each student's project. Due to the nature of this approach, it is necessary that a teacher, if not having written an ethnography him or herself, at least be familiar with basic ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation and interviewing. Only in this way, can a teacher truly understand the problems which can arise in doing fieldwork. Teaching an ethnographic writing course requires that the teacher be both an anthropologist and a writing instructor simultaneously. The

teacher must attend to the writing of the ethnography and help the students achieve communicative competence. Additionally, s/he must be knowledgeable and sensitive to the cultural workings of the culture the student is studying, the culture of the student, and the interaction of these two entities which inevitably shape the ethnography.

The ethnographic approach to writing places special demands on both teachers and students. However, it is also a valuable teaching tool because it exemplifies many aspects making up the general writing process. Additionally, the ethnographic approach to writing is particularly valuable in another way. By having to integrate information from a variety of different sources (i.e., interviews, literature reviews, observations, etc.), students learn that writing is an embodiment of their experiences. In other words, writing is more than just words on paper. In learning that writing can not be detached from the life and experiences of the author, students will find the process of writing a more enjoyable and rewarding endeavor.

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